NEW
NICK CARTER WEEKLY

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ISABEL BENTON'S TRUMP CARD

OR, A DESPERATE PLAY TO WIN

BY THE AUTHOR OF "NICK CARTER"

With a loud cry, Isabel Benton withdrew the syringe from the detective's neck, and leaped back away from the bed.

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ISABEL BENTON'S TRUMP CARD;

OR,

A Desperate Play to Win.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

MURDERED AT HIS OWN DOORSTEP.

Nick Carter was seated in the study in his house in New York when Patsy unceremoniously entered the room. He held in his hand a copy of an extra afternoon paper, just out, and this he extended toward the detective.

"Something you would like to see at once," he said. "There has been another murder at Linden Fells."

"What!" exclaimed Nick.

The first page of the paper contained the usual display headlines, but, as usual, very little information of importance followed the announcement; but what little there was, contained the information that Reginald Danton had been found that morning, dead, upon the veranda of his father's country seat on the Hudson—Linden Fells, it was called.

According to the account in the paper, nothing whatever was known concerning the tragedy save that the young man had been discovered by the servant whose duty it was to open the house for the day.

The statement made by the servant amounted, in substance, to this:

It was her duty to open the front doors of the house, to sweep off the veranda, dust the chairs, etc., etc., and she had proceeded as usual with her occupation that morning.

It was not an unusual thing for her to find her young master asleep in one of the great chairs on such occasions. His habits had long been rather irregular, and during the summer, when the nights were warm,

if he came home on the last train, which arrived at the station shortly after one o'clock in the morning, he often seated himself in a particularly large and comfortable chair which occupied a secluded corner of the piazza, and which was concealed from view by thick vines which trailed upon a lattice, and which grew very thick and luxuriantly over that portion of the building.

The servant had found him there so many times that it was not her custom to disturb him, for the reason that he was usually awakened by the noises she made in the performance of her work; and, invariably, she pretended not to see him at all.

She told the reporter that this was the only time when her presence and the noises she made had not awakened him, but on this occasion, perceiving that he still slept, or seemed to do so, she purposely made more than the usual commotion, and, finally actually knocked over a chair so that it made a great clattering noise as it fell; but, notwithstanding this fact, her young master continued undisturbed.

She could only see that he was in the chair, for the back of it was toward her; but she could see his arms at either side, and also his feet, as she looked beneath the chair.

When, however, her work was done, and he had made no move to awaken, she decided that it was her duty to arouse him, and accordingly she approached closely behind him and called:

"Mr. Reginald! Mr. Reginald!"

He did not reply to her, and, after calling in that manner several times, she stepped around in front of the chair, determined to awaken him.

One glance was, however, sufficient to assure her why he had paid no attention to the noises she had made.

Reginald Danton was dead.

More than that, he had been murdered. He had been stabbed to death while he was sleeping in that chair, if appearances could explain the situation, for the handle of a dagger protruded from the broad expanse of his shirt front, where it had been left by the assassin after the fatal blow was struck.

Now, it appeared that this servant was rather unusual in her methods, and on this occasion she displayed remarkable nerve and forethought.

Instead of screaming and fainting after the manner of people on such occasions, she looked around her hastily after the first startled cry that she had uttered upon making the discovery, and satisfied that she had attracted no attention, she hastened back to the middle of the piazza, out of reach of the chair in which the dead body of her young master was seated, and there she compelled herself to calmness while she thought over the situation.

This was to the effect that the authorities must be summoned and that the body could not be disturbed until somebody in authority arrived on the scene.

Miss Mercedes Danton, her young mistress, was still suffering from the effects of the shock and the burns she had sustained in Chicago, where she had been saved from a burning house by Nick Carter, just in time to escape being burned to death.* Since that time, now approaching a month, she had kept almost entirely to her own rooms, only leaving them, during the dusk of the evening, to wander among the shrubbery in the spacious grounds. The burns she had sustained, while not especially severe, had so badly singed her hair that it had to be cut off, and her face itself had suffered such a scorching that, in order to preserve it from any possible unpleasant consequences, she kept it swathed in soft cloths most of the time, and had not yet suffered herself to be seen save in the dimmest of lights. Therefore, this servant felt that it was unwise for her to disturb her young mistress with the awful intelligence of her brother's shocking death.

Reginald Danton's father was an old man and an excitable one. His entire life was passed among the bulls and bears of the stock exchange. At the present time he had been confined to the house for almost a week with an indisposition which the doctors found it difficult to define; but he was far from well, and correspondingly irritable. Therefore, the servant thought it would also be unwise to disturb him.

The mother was out of the question. Reginald was

*See No. 392 of the NICK CARTER WEEKLY.

her favorite child. The sudden shock of his death—and of such a death—might kill her. Plainly it would be unwise to call her.

The hour was still very early in the morning, for it was only just past five o'clock, and, inasmuch as fully three hours would elapse before any member of the family would be astir, and as it was extremely unlikely that any person other than herself would visit the veranda before that time, the serving woman decided that she would notify the authorities herself, and thus accomplish all the unpleasantness of her task in one coup, leaving it for others to break the news to the members of the family.

There was a telephone in the library, and the servant made use of that.

She called up the family physician, Dr. Pollock; not the doctor, however, who was attending Miss Mercedes, for he was a specialist, who came out every day from the city; but Dr. Pollock, who was attending the father and mother of the murdered young man.

In a very few words she acquainted Dr. Pollock with the particulars of her discovery, and was greatly gratified to hear him commend her over the 'phone for her thoughtfulness. He also assured her that he would lose no time in arriving on the scene, and that he would bring the coroner with him.

It was not yet six o'clock when the doctor accompanied by the coroner arrived at Linden Fells, and Jane Belden was waiting for them on the steps at the front door.

She pointed silently toward the chair at the far end of the veranda, behind the screen of thickly growing vines, and then she seated herself on the steps and buried her face in her hands and wept.

She had stood the strain of her discovery and the time of waiting for the doctor to arrive wonderfully well, but when at last her responsibility was ended, she became an ordinary woman again and wept.

But Dr. Pollock and the coroner paid no heed to her weeping.

They were already beside the chair wherein the corpse of the young man was seated.

And here the account of the affair ended, so far as the newspaper was concerned. It was evident that the forms had been kept open till the last minute to obtain all that could be had for that edition, and so, with an announcement that full details of the murder would be printed in a later edition, the account closed.

Nick Carter put the paper aside, and, leaning back in his chair, blew a cloud of smoke into the air.

He made no comment whatever upon what he had read, but that he was greatly disturbed, and also deeply interested, was palpably evident. Presently, when Patsy turned to leave the room, the detective stopped him.

"Lad," he said, "there is something wrong at Linden Fells—something more than this murder, I mean. I have felt it ever since I returned from Chicago. Let's go out there, Patsy, without waiting to be asked. Come, that's a good idea. We'll do it."

CHAPTER II.

A BLOW FROM BEHIND THE CHAIR.

It so happened that Dr. Pollock also wished to have Nick Carter on the scene.

The moment he knew that a murder had been committed, his first thought was of Nick Carter, whose acquaintance he had made upon an occasion somewhat similar to this one, and at the same house.*

Since that time they had not met, but the doctor had many pleasant recollections of the detective, and, moreover, he had a profound respect for Nick Carter's wonderful abilities.

A strange circumstance connected with his thoughts of Nick Carter at that time was that he had been considering the wisdom of consulting the detective for some time past.

Not that there was anything especially wrong at Linden Fells, or that he could, if asked to do so, supply any really good reason for his wish to consult the detective; but ever since the return of Mercedes Danton from Chicago,** where she had sustained those

*See number 388 of the NICK CARTER WEEKLY, "The Murder at Linden Fells."

**See No. 392 of the NICK CARTER WEEKLY, "A Queen of Her Kind."

injuries to which reference has already been made, the doctor had felt that all was not as it should be.

He had hesitated to say anything to the detective, however, lest his misgivings should be attributed to jealousy—professional jealousy, because he had not once been consulted in regard to those same injuries.

A specialist had been called in at once after Mercedes' return, and Dr. Pollock had not seen the young woman at all, save at a distance and in half darkness.

But it was not professional jealousy, or, in fact, jealousy of any kind which had disturbed the doctor; in fact, he could not have told what it was that disturbed him; he could only have said that he was disturbed by he knew not what, and he had felt more than once that the detective, Nick Carter, was the only person who could be depended upon to listen to such a statement without sneering.

The illness of the old gentleman puzzled him. There seemed to be nothing whatever the matter with him, and yet he was unmistakably ill. The doctor had mentioned having a consultation, but Mr. Danton had pooh-poohed the idea, and had told him flatly that when he found himself unable to treat a whimsical old man, it was time for him to resign his post and give another physician a chance.

Then there was the old lady. She was ailing, too; and she had grown steadily weaker—also without a definite or defined reason.

Dr. Pollock was an excellent physician, a master of his profession, but he had to confess himself puzzled by the conditions which surrounded him at Linden Fells—the more, because those very conditions did not warrant him in calling in other physicians in consultation.

When, therefore, he was told over the telephone that young Reginald Danton had been murdered on his own doorstep, he was amazed at himself that he was not more greatly surprised than he was. It was the first moment when he admitted to himself that he had, without knowing it, been expecting a calamity of some kind to happen.

As soon as Jane Belden finished her communication, he called up the coroner and told him of the murder, saying that he was about starting for the Fells in his automobile, and that he would stop for the coroner on the way; and immediately thereafter he sought to get the detective over the 'phone.

But it happened that the 'phone was in one of its throes of non-service.

He tried and tried again, but for some inexplicable reason he could not get Nick Carter; and as time was passing, he finally gave it up, sought the coroner, and they went out to the Fells together.

There, as we know, he again had no opportunity to telephone to the detective.

The very nature of the case made it necessary that he and the coroner should perform their work swiftly and remove the body into the house as soon as possible. And so it happened that it was really many hours after his first knowledge of the crime before he had an opportunity of telephoning to Nick Carter, and that when he finally did so, he was told that the detective had gone out and doubtless would not return before the following day—in other words, the telephone call reached the house of the detective almost an hour after Patsy took the "extra" into the study, and at that time Nick and Patsy had both gone out.

* * * * * * *

When the detective, accompanied by his young assistant, Patsy, boarded the train at the Grand Central Station, they were both effectually disguised, for Nick had his own good reasons for desiring to appear on the ground incognito—that is, unknown to the members and servants of the household.

There had been a strong friendship between the detective and Reginald Danton, and so it was that Nick Carter felt a personal interest in the case.

When the detective left the train he repaired at once to the house of Dr. Pollock, and fortunately found him in, and naturally overjoyed that the detective had come to him of his own volition without awaiting the delayed message that he had sought so vainly to send.

"Let us begin right, doctor," said the detective. "I have my own reasons for not wishing it to appear that Nick Carter is engaged upon this case at all. It is

more than likely that I will be sent for by some member of the family; but if I am sent for, I have arranged to have it announced that I am out of town. Do you understand me?"

"I think so."

"I will make my statement even more emphatic."

"As emphatic as you please."

"Very well, then; this: I do not, under any circumstances, wish any other person than ourselves to know that I am here, or that I am even available. If Mercedes——"

"Mercedes least of all, I should say," interrupted the doctor.

"Why?"

"I don't know why, only that Mercedes has not been at all like herself since her return from Chicago, where you saved her from the fire. Have you seen her since then?"

"No."

"Nor have I. She sent for a specialist at once and has not even consulted me about her injuries. This is an unusual proceeding."

"I hope, doctor, that you are not professionally jealous," smiled Nick.

"I am professionally as well as personally disturbed, I tell you, Carter, there is something wrong here somewhere."

"I should say that there is considerable that is wrong. But to continue."

"Certainly. Pardon me. Go ahead."

"Did you ever happen to hear of Joshua Juniper?"

"Often. He is a downtown detective, is he not?"

"Yes; and he is also Nick Carter, although few people are aware of it."

"I see."

"I want you to take me around to the coroner and introduce me to him as Mr. Juniper. You can say that you took it upon yourself to send for Nick Carter, but discovered that he was out of the city. That then, you communicated with the chief of the detective bureau in New York, and was recommended to send for Juniper. After that, leave the rest to me."

"All right; come ahead. Jove! but I'm glad that you are here."

"One moment, doctor. I want to ask you a few questions about the murder."

"Very well."

"How did you first hear about it?"

"Over the telephone, from Jane Belden, one of the maids."

"Surprising forethought on her part, was it not?"

"Unusual, perhaps. Hardly surprising under the circumstances."

"Why so?"

"For the reason that there was really nobody in the house whom she could summon to her aid without bringing down another calamity; at least, it amounted to about that situation when she discovered the body of Reginald."

"How so?"

"Mercedes has kept to her room and in the dark most of the time since her return from Chicago. She could have done nothing if told of the murder. Mr. Danton is ill; Mrs. Danton is ill, and——"

"Very well; the maid telephoned for you. Did she leave the body entirely undisturbed until you arrived on the scene?"

"She assured me that she had not touched it at all. In fact, she said that after telephoning she returned to the piazza steps and waited there until we arrived. She did not change her position until we got there."

"Very good; you arrived in company with the coroner, did you not?"

"Yes."

"Now tell me what you did then."

"It was half-past five—a little more—when I got there. Reginald had been dead several hours."

"How many? At what time should you say the blow was struck?"

"As early as two o'clock in the morning."

"Three hours and a half, eh?"

"Yes."

"I wish I might have been there with you; but I was not and so will have to trust to your eyes and senses for what can be discovered from that moment. He

was in the big chair at the end of the piazza, was he not?"

"Yes; the one that is screened by the vines. He was in the habit of dropping asleep in that chair, warm nights, when he arrived home with too much wine aboard; but——"

"Go on; but what?"

"The chair was not in the position it usually occupied. I noticed that at once. I could almost swear that the chair has never occupied but one position since I have been familiar with the premises."

"And that was——"

"It always faced to the west."

"I see; and this morning——"

"It was facing north."

"Perhaps Reginald turned it that way before he dropped into it."

"If he did, it was the only time within the recollection of Jane Belden that he has ever done so. She has found him sleeping there often, but he had never taken the trouble to move the chair before going to sleep, until last night."

"Well, that tells us very little; only that the assassin, after striking the blow, wheeled the chair around so that discovery would be delayed as long as possible. Now, what more?"

"Whoever struck the blow, did so from over the victim's shoulder. The blow was downward, and from the position of the weapon, must have been struck from behind."

"What was the weapon?"

"A long, thin-bladed, two-edged dagger. Reginald was stabbed directly through the heart."

"So that he must have died instantly."

"I do not think he could have moved after he was struck—more than to shudder."

"Had the body been robbed?"

"I do not think it had been touched at all. I was particularly impressed with that belief when I viewed it. I should say that the assassin approached from behind, leaned over the chair, struck the blow, turned the chair about, and then calmly walked away."

"Where to?"

"Ah! That is the question."

"You have already said that the maid waited on the steps until you arrived. That means, I suppose, that she did not go off the steps."

"Certainly."

"The walks around the house are of gravel——"

"I know what you would suggest, Mr. Carter. I may as well tell you at once that it did not occur to me to look at the walks, and I doubt if I would have discovered anything if I had done so."

"Why?"

"Because it would require the eyes of an expert like yourself to determine anything from such an examination. I am not an expert."

"True. Had you no other reason for making that remark in just that tone of voice?"

"No; that is, no good reason."

"You are ambiguous."

"Well, I have not forgotten that the other murder that occurred in that house was committed from the inside of it; and Jane Belden tells me that she found the front door ajar, when she came down to her work this morning."

CHAPTER III.

A WOMAN'S HAND.

"That might be accounted for by supposing that Reginald opened the door with his key before he decided to take a nap in the chair," said Nick.

"It might," replied the doctor.

"If the assassin came out of the house to commit the deed, and then returned to the house, he would scarcely have left the door open behind him to show the direction of his flight," suggested Nick.

"Not unless he would wish to convey the very impression you have named," replied the doctor.

"Good!" exclaimed Nick. "You would not make such a bad detective after all, doctor, if you had half a chance to study the art."

"Look here, Mr. Carter, I don't make any pretense to detective abilities, but I have felt for almost a month that there is something wrong inside that house. I

was not even surprised when Jane Belden told me of the murder over the 'phone this morning."

"Do you mean that you were expecting a murder?"

"Certainly not. I mean that I was in a condition of mind regarding that house where I would not have been surprised if it had been blown up with dynamite."

"Humph!" said Nick. "You are expressive if not lucid. Now let us return to the crime itself. What else did you discover?"

"Nothing else."

"Nothing?"

"Absolutely not a thing. Shall I give you an epitome of all that occurred from the instant I received the telephone message?"

"Yes."

"Very well: I received the message from Jane Belden. I asked her over the 'phone if she had touched the body or disturbed it at all. She said she had not and would not. I told her not to go near it again until we got there. She said she would not. I ordered her to permit nobody else to touch it, and she assured me that there was not the least likelihood that another person would approach that part of the house for at least three hours yet.

"Then I called up the coroner and told him about it. I told him that I would start at once and that I would stop for him. I did so. Then I tried to get you over the 'phone, but for some reason I could not get the connection. I resolved to try later.

"Then I went after the coroner and we went together to the Fells. The big gates were not opened yet, and I left my machine out in the road. The coroner and I ascended the path together. We discovered Jane Belden standing at the steps, leaning against the frame of the *porte cochere*. She looked terribly frightened and began to weep as we approached.

"The coroner and I approached the body together. The back of the chair was toward us; the body faced away from us. It had settled down somewhat, but not really more than it might have done had Reginald been alive and sleeping instead of dead—murdered.

"I felt the forehead and pulse. The body was already chilled.

"We both pronounced Reginald dead, and agreed that he had been dead about three hours and a half—perhaps four hours.

"We examined the locality around the chair and on the piazza with great care. There was not a sign of a disturbance of any kind. Reginald's jewelry, and a wad of money, in his vest pocket, were undisturbed. We questioned the maid, but discovered nothing which you have not already been told."

"Was there a considerable flow of blood?"

"Very little. The dagger had been struck home so hard and had been left without moving it, where it fell, that there was very little chance for blood to flow. There would naturally be internal bleeding; but the clothing was scarcely soiled at all."

"What did you do next?"

"Satisfied that we could discover nothing and accomplish nothing by leaving it where it was, we carried it, chair and all, to Reginald's room."

"And then——"

"I begged the coroner to leave it as it was until I could send for you. He consented; but when I telephoned and found that you could not be communicated with to-day—at least, that was the reply I received—it was decided to permit the undertakers to perform their work; so when you see the body you will find it prepared for burial."

"Well, that can't be helped now. What did you do next?"

"I took it upon myself to break the news to the members of the family."

"Good! Whom did you seek first?"

"Mercedes."

"Tell me about it, doctor."

"I thought she was the best one to inform first. I wished her to break it to her mother and father."

"Naturally. Go on."

"It was still too early for her to rise for the day, but I sent for her maid."

"Sarah Kearney?"

"No. Sarah Kearney has left her employ."

"Indeed! Well, you sent for the maid, and through her you sent word to Mercedes, I suppose."

"Yes. I sent word that an accident had happened, and that it was important that I communicate with her in person at once. I begged her to permit me an interview."

"Well?"

"She returned word that she could not see me; that it was impossible."

"What did you do then?"

"I wrote a note in which I told her that her brother had been severely wounded and that I despaired of his life; that the news of the accident must be broken to her father and mother, and I thought she was the most fitting person to perform that service. I added at the bottom of the note that her brother might not live twenty minutes."

"And, of course, she came then, at once."

"She did nothing of the sort. Her maid returned in a great fright and demanded to know what I had done. She said that her mistress had read my note and straightway had fallen in a faint to the floor. I started to go to her, but the maid barred the way and would not permit me to enter the room. The sum of it all is that I have not seen Mercedes at all."

"It is not like Mercedes, is it, to act that way?"

"Not at all. One would think that the fire in Chicago deranged all her mental faculties, for it is certain that she has not been the same since her return from there. Before she left home to take that trip she was exceedingly gracious to me."

"And now——"

"Now, I find myself utterly ignored."

"What did you do next?"

"I went directly to Mr. Danton himself. I told him all about it. I thought it would kill him, but he received the news in a strangely apathetic way; almost as if the shock was so great that he did not realize it; or——"

"You were about to add something else, doctor."

"Or, as if he had taken a sleeping potion upon retiring and had not recovered from the effects of it. I left him to tell his wife. I came away. There seemed to be nothing for me to do."

"The old gentleman did not ask you to remain?"

"No. He did not seem to know what he was about at all."

"What, in your opinion, doctor, will be the effect upon that household, of this calamity?"

"It will be terrible. I dread to think of it."

"Tell me what you think."

"I cannot tell you without making a confession."

"It will not be a confession, doctor, for I know already what you would say. You have told me half a dozen times since I have been in this room. You are in love with Mercedes."

"My God, Carter——"

"Never mind protests. You are in love with Mercedes. If you have not told her of your love, you have, at least, permitted her to discover it. You were not repulsed as you feared to be; indeed, let us say that you were led to hope, and now, since her return from the West, all your hopes have been blighted. This condition of mind has warped your judgment in some respects, but it has also, perhaps, made it keener in others. Now to return: What will be the general effect of this calamity upon the house of Danton?"

"Almost annihilation, I fear. If Mercedes is really in the condition of mind I fear she is, it will kill her. It will destroy the mother's mind entirely, and if I have not forgotten all I have learned in my profession, the old gentleman will not survive the shock for long. The blow which struck Reginald Danton to the heart has also reached the vitals of his father, mother and sister."

"Doctor," said Nick, changing the subject abruptly, "do you remember a young woman who was once Mercedes Danton's maid?—a young woman who afterward attempted, with the assistance of one Paul Rogers, to put the entire Danton family out of existence?—a young woman who is almost the counterpart in feature and voice of Mercedes Danton? In other words, do you remember Isabel Benton?"*

*For the stories concerning Isabel Benton read Nos. 388, 389, 390 and 392 of the NICK CARTER WEEKLY.

"Indeed I do."

"Has it occurred to you that Isabel Benton may be in the neighborhood, and that it was perhaps her hand which struck the dagger to the heart of Reginald Dan ton last night?"

"But," exclaimed the doctor, "Isabel Benton is not now a member of the household; she could not have duped the father, worried the mother, and poisoned the mind of Mercedes, even if she was near enough to creep upon the piazza and murder Reginald."

"Granted. Still, Isabel Benton is a remarkable woman. She can accomplish many things which would appear as impossible to another, less expert in villainy than she is."

"What do you mean by the insinuation, Carter?"

"I mean that I see the hand of Isabel Benton in all that has happened here since the return of Mercedes from the West. She may not be in that house, but she has an emissary in it, I am sure. She may not have duped the father and worried the mother, as you express it, but I am reasonably certain that she could, if she would, tell us who has done it; and I am as reasonably certain that in some way she could, if she would, explain the extraordinary actions of Mercedes. Mercedes Danton was not herself when I saved her from the fire, but I attributed that circumstance to shock and suffering, for she certainly did suffer; now, however, there has been time for her to recover. Come; let us go to the coroner. I want to get inside the house at the Fells as soon as possible."

CHAPTER IV.

"YOUR RIGHT HAND! THERE IS BLOOD UPON IT!"

It will be remembered that Patsy came on the train to Linden Fells with the detective; but he did not accompany Nick Carter to the house of the doctor. Instead, the detective dispatched him at once to the scene of the murder.

He sent him, moreover, without any special instructions.

He was directed simply to go to Linden Fells, and to pick up whatever information there might be floating about outside the house, and as this was a department in the detective's work in which Patsy was especially proficient, Nick felt assured that the young assistant would have acquired considerable knowledge of a general character by the time they met again.

In this he was not mistaken.

After the interview with the coroner, from which Nick gleaned nothing whatever that was new, but with a note of introduction and recommendation to the officer in charge at the house, Nick started for the Fells.

He found Patsy seated on a mossy bank near the gate awaiting him, and he crossed the road and seated himself beside his young assistant.

"Nailed anything, Patsy?" he asked.

"Not much. They are the stupidest lot of servants I ever saw; but there is one interesting point about them—they are all new."

"All new?" asked Nick. "Do you mean that the old servants of the family, many of whom have been here for years, have gone?"

"That's about the size of it. As far as I can learn, there is not a single one of the old servants left on the place; in the stable, in the garden, or in the house."

"That is strange. How long have these new people been here?"

"Some of them a week, some not so long. Some of them almost a month; not one of them any longer than that."

"A month. Humph! Mercedes returned about a month ago. Who has made all the changes?"

"Nobody seems to know the answer to that question. If there was only one of the old servants left, a fellow might find out something, but the last one of them has gone. There is one, however, who doesn't live far away from here. I'll look her up if you say so."

"Is it Sarah Kearney?"

"Yes."

"Find her by all means. Let that be your next duty; and report to me as soon as you have seen her."

"Correct."

"What is the general talk among the servants about the murder?"

"I couldn't pick up but one fact which amounted to information."

"What was that?"

"One of the stable boys says he saw Mr. Reginald come home this morning. He said it was shortly after the train from New York arrived at the station."

"About half-past one."

"Yes. Reginald, according to his story, came up the walk as usual and went up on the piazza. The boy didn't look that way again till about half an hour later, and then he says he saw a woman on the piazza, talking with Reginald."

"Patsy," said Nick, slowly, "you give me that information in a tone which doesn't mean anything particularly, and yet it would seem important. Do you think the boy lied?"

"No; I think he was mistaken. When I questioned him and nailed him down to facts, all he could swear that he saw was something white, like a woman's dress; he did not even see that it was a woman, or, if it was, that there was anybody there with her. It might have been nothing more than——"

"Than what?"

"Well, if Reginald Denton wore a white vest, it might have been that and nothing more."

"How did the boy happen to be up at that hour?"

"He had been down to the city and came up on that train himself; but he jumped off the moment it reached the station, and hurried home. He sleeps in the stable, and he was looking out of the window when he saw the white figure on the piazza—or thinks he did."

"There isn't much to that boy's information, but all the same I will have a talk with him. Now, I want you to look up Sarah Kearney at once. You can meet me here again shortly after dark."

As Nick Carter walked up the pathway toward the house, he glanced surreptitiously under his hat rim at the windows of the rooms he knew were occupied by Mrs. Denton, and his keen eyes discovered at once that some person was concealed behind the shutters of one of them, engaged in intently watching his approach.

"Can that be Mercedes, or is it her maid?" he asked himself, mentally; "and would either of them be shrewd enough to penetrate a disguise? I think not. Besides, very few persons know that Joshua Juniper is a disguise at all."

He passed on into the house, saw the officer in charge of the place, placed there by the order of the coroner, was at once given the run of the house, and immediately began his system of research.

First he sought the room to which the body had been taken, but there he could discover nothing, for if there had been any traces of any kind, left behind by the assassin, they had been effectually removed by the undertaker and his assistants in his work.

Nevertheless, there was a startling surprise in store for the detective, and he found it awaiting him when he emerged from the room of death.

The door to that room was set slightly back into the wall, so that there was a recess in front of it, quite deep enough to conceal a person in entering or coming out of it; and as he closed the door behind him he heard the sound of a light footfall approaching rapidly along the corridor.

He halted where he stood, with his hand still on the knob of the door, and waited.

Then, in another instant the figure of a woman turned abruptly into the recess, and fairly collided with him.

She started back with a cry of surprise and alarm when she perceived that another was there before her; but Nick did not give her a chance to speak, for he turned the handle of the door, pushed it open behind him and stepped back into the room.

"You were coming to this room?" he asked, politely; and it was when the woman replied to him that he experienced what he afterward called one of the surprises of his life.

"Yes," she replied, following him and waiting for him to close the door again, with them inside the room; and it was not what she said, but the voice in which she spoke that surprised the detective—for it was a voice which he instantly recognized.

In the half obscurity of the hallway he had not seen

her face, but now he stepped back so that the light from the window shone full upon it, and he had to acknowledge to himself that the disguise was almost perfect. So perfect, in fact, that he might himself have passed the woman in the street a dozen times without recognizing her, unless his attention had for some reason been especially called to her.

"Cora Tempest," was the mental comment he made: but his face gave no indication of his surprise. It was at once evident to him that she had no idea of his own identity, and he wondered if she even knew that there was a detective in the house at all.

But that she was Cora Tempest was certain.

True, she had covered her own copper-colored hair with a wig of tresses as black as the wing of a crow, save where it was slightly intermixed with gray; and she had traced a crow's foot upon each temple, so lightly and evenly that its presence was hardly noticeable, save to add a suggestion of years to her countenance. Her eyes, naturally dark, of reddish brown, seemed to have been rendered almost black under the shadow of the raven hair, and deft touches here and there had so altered the general appearance of her face that while she was actually without much disguise, she was still thoroughly transformed.

Cora Tempest had been known to Nick Carter while she was still a child. Once, in the long ago, she had given the detective timely warning of a peril which threatened him, and had so saved his life. After that, she had disappeared for a long time, only to reappear again after she had blossomed into womanhood—full and exquisitely beautiful womanhood—but also as the seemingly willing dupe of Isabel Benton. As Cora Dumont," she had been implicated in the mysterious Linden burglaries, but she had revealed herself to Nick, who had not seen her since she was a child, and became she had betrayed Isabel Benton to the detective she had been condemned to death along with Nick Carter in the burning house in the suburbs of the Lake City.

Could it be possible that after all her protestations to Nick, she had again linked her fortunes with Isabel Benton? Was it possible that she was the emissary to which Nick had referred when he told the doctor that if Isabel Benton was not an inmate of the house at Linden Fells, she at least had a representative there?

It is not surprising that Nick regarded her presence with amazement, for he had decided in his own mind that Cora Tempest was a woman to be trusted, notwithstanding her temporary wandering from the path of rectitude.

He had replaced her almost in the same niche in his regard that she had occupied when she was a schoolgirl and lived in the same street with him, opposite his own home; and could it be that he had misjudged her totally? Could it be that she was a traitor to him, and to every protestation she had made regarding her future?

It seemed to him in that first instant of discovery, that there could be only one explanation of her presence in the house at Linden Fells, and that one was certainly not to her credit.

Involuntarily, almost, he let his eyes fall to her right hand, for the question shot into his mind, "Could that hand be the one which had struck the death blow through the heart of Reginald Danton?"

But the detective had not experienced all his surprises yet, for the instant the door was closed, Cora placed her back against it, and with slow deliberation asked:

"Who are you, sir, and why are you here? What right have you in this room?"

"The right of an officer who has been sent here by the coroner to investigate this murder," replied Nick, coldly. "So now, if you please, I will ask you the same questions."

"I had not been told that a detective was here," she replied. "I am exceedingly glad that you are such, however. I am the housekeeper."

"The housekeeper, eh?" said Nick. "Will you tell me why you came to this room in such a hurry just now?"

"Certainly: because I saw you pass through the hall; I watched you and saw you enter this room. Not knowing who you were, I made it my business to inquire."

"Quite proper," replied Nick; "and now that you are here, and we are alone together, I'll make it my business to institute a few inquiries myself."

Then suddenly altering his tone he demanded, savagely:

"Let me see your hand—your right hand, woman! There is blood upon it!"

CHAPTER V.

WHERE THE FINGER OF SUSPICION POINTS.

Without an instant's hesitation and with a calm, superior smile upon her face, Cora Tempest extended her right hand toward the detective.

"I fear that you are but a poor detective if you leap at conclusions in that manner," she said.

Nick did not reply; but he took the hand in his own and held it for an instant; and then, somewhat to his surprise, he felt a tremor dart through her and communicate its throbbing impulse to his own person.

Instantly he released her hand and stepped back a pace, and he could see that even through the coating of bismuth and chalk with which she had imparted that transparent whiteness to her skin, the quick blood had rushed to the surface in a flush of consciousness and that her eyes were sparkling wondrously.

"Can it be possible that she has recognized me from the touch of my hand?" he asked himself; but already the bright light had fled from her eyes and her face had resumed its pallor.

But, being released from the clasp of his hand, she stepped back, away from him, and passed to the opposite side of the bier, so that they stood with the corpse of Reginald Danton between them.

"You are the housekeeper, you say. What is your name?" asked Nick.

"Dawson," she replied, laconically.

"Miss or Mrs.?" persisted Nick.

"My employers have not as yet dignified me by either title," she replied. "I am called Dawson."

"Very well, Dawson. How long have you occupied your present position?"

"Two weeks to-day."

"Indeed! Then you are among the newly recruited servants?"

"All the servants in this house are newly recruited, sir," she remarked, coldly, and with a strangely enigmatical smile.

"What do you mean by that, Dawson? The manner of your reply is suggestive of more behind it."

"Being a detective, you should be able to reply to that question yourself, sir."

"Do you mean that the 'help' in this house is new throughout?"

"Yes; and it would seem as if you already should have remarked that fact."

"How many are here longer than you?" insisted Nick, ignoring her sarcasm.

"Three, I think; or four. Not more."

"Who employed you?"

"Miss Danton. She is mistress of the household."

"Indeed. I was told that she is invalided to her room and sees nobody."

"She sees the new servants, sir."

"Ah! Again that innuendo. Might I venture to inquire the hidden meaning of your replies to my questions?"

"There is no hidden meaning at all."

"Tell me how and why you were employed, then."

"I was employed in the usual way—by being engaged by the mistress to serve. I suppose the reason was that she needed a housekeeper, and I happened to suit."

"Good!" Nick Carter appreciated a sharp tongue and a quick wit, and he saw that Cora had not lost the abilities of either of hers.

For an instant he thought of the wisdom of revealing to her who he was, and at the same moment he determined to await developments.

As he looked into Cora's eyes and heard her voice, all his trust in her returned. He could not bring himself to believe that she was an accomplice of the woman whom he held responsible for all the ills that had happened and were to happen in that house—and yet, his theory of putting two and two together almost

compelled him to believe that she could not be there for a good reason.

"What good reason could there have been to bring her here at all?" he asked himself.

Once, upon an historic occasion, Cora Tempest had calmly confessed that she loved the detective, and at that time, looking into her matchless eyes, Nick Carter had felt his senses thrill with pleasure that he should be so regarded by a beautiful woman. What man would not, when added to the confession, there is the knowledge that it is the absolute truth.

Later, upon that same historic occasion, she had charged him with loving Mercedes Danton, and for a moment, when the young heiress needed assistance, she had hesitated to render it, because of the fiercely jealous rage that had surged in her heart at the time.

But later, Cora devoted herself to Mercedes—or, at least, she had seemingly done so.

And Cora and Nick had parted the best of friends; had parted with a renewal of the old-time confidence that had existed between them when she, as a child, had watched for him in the street before her home, and had managed upon every possible opportunity to win a bow and a smile from her hero.

He had enshrined her in his memory as that beautiful child of such great promise. He had forced himself to eliminate from his memory all that had happened since then to alter his judgment concerning her.

And yet, when they met in Chicago, there were environments about her which could not redound to her benefit in his estimation—environments which might be explained away, and for which she need not be held culpably responsible.

But the fact remained that she had been a friend and accomplice of Isabel Benton, even though she did not and could not know the depths of villainy of her associate.

Then—at that time—Nick was quite willing to believe that Cora was nothing more than Isabel's dupe; but now, she could not be a dupe. That explanation would not suffice now.

Cora Tempest had no need to serve as a servant in any household for her livelihood. She was independent of such a life.

Then why had she chosen to appear in the home of the Dantons in disguise, and as a servant, if it were not for the all-sufficient reason that she was there for evil? For the purpose of aiding and assisting the machinations of Isabel Benton, and of doing harm to Mercedes Danton?

Truly appearances were against her—terribly against her, it seemed.

And yet, as Nick looked into her eyes he could see no guile there. He wondered, vaguely, if his own were blurred by his admiration for this woman. He wondered if his regard for her had been really greater than he had admitted to himself, and if he was disposed to permit his inclinations to warp his judgment.

He drew farther away from her into the recess of the window, and in that instant he determined to treat her as a suspected person until he knew positively to the contrary.

"We will leave the question of your employment," he said, coldly, "and come directly to—this," and he raised his hand and pointed at the corpse between them. "What do you know about this?"

"I know that Reginald Danton is dead. That seems to be the sum of all knowledge in this house at present," she replied.

"You were in the house when the murder was committed?" continued Nick.

"Naturally. I have not been out of it since I came here as housekeeper, save to walk in the garden two or three times."

"You were familiar with the habits of the family?"

"As familiar as one may become during an experience of two weeks."

"Had Reginald, in that time, and to your knowledge, slept in that chair on the piazza?"

"Frequently. Oftener, I should say, than he has slept in his bed; save, of course, that he inevitably sought his bed after being awakened from his sleep in the chair."

"This habit was generally known throughout the house, was it not?"

"No; I do not think so."

"Indeed. Why not?"

"I have already informed you that the servants are all new to the place. Doubtless the old servants—those who have been discharged during the last month—knew about this custom of his; but among the new ones—and they are all new—I do not think it was known save to Jane Belden and myself."

"And possibly his valet."

"Are you a detective, and have not yet discovered that Reginald Danton has had no valet for more than a week?" she asked, smiling aggravatingly into his face; and Nick shrugged his shoulders. Truly her tongue was sharp, and she knew how to spice the information she chose to give him, after a manner which was certainly her own.

"Then you think, as a matter of fact, that this habit of his was really entirely unknown to others in the house than you and the servant, Jane Belden?"

"I did not say so; I said to other servants in the house."

"Ah! Then it was known to his father and mother—and sister."

"To the young mistress of the house, without question; I cannot say as to the parents."

"There is an insinuation in your reply, Miss Dawson."

"Unintentional, I assure you. You must take it for what it is worth, sir."

"How is it that Reginald had no valet?"

"The old one was discharged in his absence. A new one was disposed of in the same manner. A third met the same fate, and—the fourth has not yet appeared. Perhaps he became tired of obtaining new ones only to have them immediately dismissed by the young mistress, who is too ill to leave her rooms, save when there is very little light to—to affect her eyes."

Nick advanced a step, quickly.

"Woman," he said sharply, "your insinuations have come too far for me to permit them to pass unnoticed any longer. Do you mean to tell me that Mercedes Danton has willfully dismissed the old servants and taken on new ones? Do you mean that she has willfully deprived her brother of a body servant? Do you mean —— Bah! what do you mean?"

"I mean that she has done these things you mention. Whether the doing of them might be termed willful or not, is for you, as a detective, to determine. I can only say that it has been done, and by her."

"Are you prepared to swear that you, Jane Belden, and Mercedes Danton, are the only persons who were aware of Reginald's habit of sleeping on the piazza?"

"Yes."

"And are you equally aware that the responsibility for his death, in that case, narrows itself to four persons? Do you realize that, in such a case, nothing short of the arrest and conviction of a stranger, can keep suspicion from falling upon Jane Belden—and yourself?"

"You forget one other," she replied, smiling coldly at him. "You neglected to include, in your rather sweeping assertion, the young mistress of the house."

CHAPTER VI.

"TO SAVE THE WOMAN YOU LOVE."

"Mercedes Danton!" exclaimed Nick. "No; I did not forget her; I did not even think of her."

"And yet," said Cora, slowly, and with intense irony, "you are a detective."

The detective shrugged his shoulders and refrained from giving expression to the annoyance he felt at her persistency. Coldly he asked:

"Would you openly charge the sister of this dead man with his death?"

"No. But I insist that if the finger of suspicion should point at Jane Belden, or at me, it has still more reason to point at my mistress. She possessed the same knowledge, and it is evident that motive might be discovered in her case where none could be found in ours."

"Nonsense!"

"Do detectives permit personal sentiments to enter into their work?"

"Sometimes. We need not discuss that."

"There seems to be many things, according to the

estimation in which you hold them, which we need not discuss, sir."

"Doubtless. Let us return to Reginald's habit of sleeping in the chair. How long have you known that such was his habit?"

"Since the first morning after my arrival in this house."

"Indeed. How often have you seen him there? Asleep, I mean."

"He has slept there almost every morning, from half-past one till daylight, since I came here. It rained once, I think, and then he went straight to his room; but I think that is the only exception."

"Have you been in the habit of roaming through the house at such hours, that you are aware of so much concerning him?"

"I am at least aware of that much."

"You have seen him there with your own eyes, each time, have you? You have depended upon the evidence of your own senses, and not upon the reports made to you by Jane Belden?"

"I speak only of the times I have seen him myself—which has been every time!"

"Did you see him there this morning?" asked Nick, suddenly.

"I did," she replied, calmly.

"At what time?"

"About four o'clock."

"At four o'clock! That was after he was killed. He was stone dead at that time."

"Yes."

"Did you know it, when you saw him?"

"Certainly. I went quite close to him and looked at him to make sure that he was dead."

"Good heavens! Do you mean that you expected to find him dead?"

"I have expected to find him dead each morning when I have gone there to look at him. I have been surprised when I have discovered that he was still living, and so what I discovered this morning, while it was a shock, was hardly in the nature of a surprise."

"Do you realize that you are convicting yourself of at least complicity in this crime by your admissions?"

"I know that I am not."

"Bah! You talk in enigmas."

"Only because you refuse to see the truth, sir."

"If you expected to find that he had been murdered, why did you not take measures to prevent such a crime?"

"I have done so as well as it could be done."

"How?"

"By warning him."

"Warning him?"

"Yes; I have told him that his life was threatened. I have told him that he ought not to sleep there on the piazza. I have warned him that he would sleep without waking if he persisted in the habit; and I told him some of my reasons why I thought so; but he only laughed at me. He did not, or would not believe me."

"And so you have gone there to look at him every morning at four o'clock? Your explanation of this strange conduct is that you were watching over him; eh?"

"I do not offer it as an explanation. I give it merely as a statement."

"And that is why you have made a practice of wandering about the house at that early hour in the morning, is it?"

"No. I have wandered about the house at that early hour in the morning because I hoped to be present when his life was attempted, and to save him."

"To save him! Save him from whom?"

"From the one who would have murdered him; from the one whom I think did murder him."

"Ah! Now we are getting at it. You mean yourself. You mean that you had been instructed to kill him. You mean that you had agreed to do so. You mean that your conscience revolted and that you warned him, in order to save him from yourself. You mean that you went there each morning with the intention of striking the blow, but that at the last moment your courage failed you, and you came away.

[illegible] mean that you did not really dare to do the deed until this morning. Is not that what you mean?"

"Not at all. I have meant nothing of the sort."

"Then whose was the hand you intended to stay at the last moment?"

"My mistress'."

Nick frowned heavily.

"Having committed the awful deed, you would now commit a worse one, and charge your own crime to an innocent and beautiful young woman?" he said, icily.

For reply, Cora advanced a step nearer to the detective, and bending a little forward, she said, slowly:

"I charge the young woman who is mistress of this house with the murder of Reginald Danton. Make of that statement what you will. I do not seek to prove it, for I know that you will prove it yourself before you have been here a day longer."

"I will prove it? I? But wait. Before I take you into custody, as I must do, I think, let me ask you other questions. If you charge Mercedes Danton with this crime, what reason, [illegible] reasons, have you for doing so?"

"I need not reply to those questions— now."

"No; you need not; but you will. Is it a part and parcel of this strange story you tell that your mistress has also made these pilgrimages to the chair on the porch where her brother was sleeping?"

"Yes."

"And on the occasions when you have gone there, seeking to save him from being murdered, do you mean to say that you have followed her there?".

"I have followed her there on each occasion—save one."

"And that one ——"

"Was this morning."

"When, you would say, she got there before you. You were too late. Her hellish work, or words to that effect, was already done. Is that it?"

"That is it."

"Allow me to say that for cool effrontery you beat the devil, Miss Torrens. Would you care to add to your statement, that on each occasion she has gone there armed and prepared to strike?"

"No," calmly, and without appearing to notice the sarcasm of his question— "I have not, on any occasion, seen a weapon of any sort in her possession."

"Indeed! That is remarkable!" and Nick smiled ironically. "Has she always sought him at the hour of four in the morning?"

"Not always. Sometimes earlier; sometimes later; but usually between three and four."

"And on each occasion you have watched for her, expecting her to go there; you have followed her, intending to stay the fatal blow; you have acted the part of a guardian angel, only to fail at the last moment, and to be absent upon the one occasion among them all when she had determined to strike. Jove, woman! of all improbable tales, yours will become the standard."

"And yet," she replied, "within twenty-four hours— nay, within an hour, you will believe every word of it."

Nick smiled incredulously.

"Come," he said, "let us proceed. How was it that you missed your mistress this morning?"

"I was weary from loss of sleep. I slept. I did not awaken till four. When I did awaken I knew that she had left her rooms, and——"

"How did you know that?"

"Because I kept a slender thread stretched from the knob of her door across the hall. It was not strong enough for her to feel its resistance when she opened the door, but it could only be broken by the opening of the door. It was broken when I awoke."

"So you knew she had left her room. What did you do then?"

"I hastened to the piazza."

"Expecting to find that Reginald had been killed?"

"Fearing it; and yet I hoped that this expedition might have been as the others."

"You found, however, that she had selected this time to strike. Still you did not give the alarm. You returned quietly to your room, and——"

"On the contrary, I left the house at once. That is, as soon as I had written a hasty letter to New York. I took it to the post office and dropped it in the mail box. Then I returned to my room and waited, for I expected that the person to whom I had written would wish me to do so. I did not give the alarm—I par-

nitted Jane Belden to discover the body and to sum-
non the authorities, because I hoped all the time that
he person to whom I had written would wish me to
se."

"Indeed! You relate wonderful stories. Who is
hat person to whom you wrote a letter while the body
f a murdered man was slowly growing cold almost
eside you—while a murderess was sleeping the sleep
f the just within a few feet of you, according to your
le—while a man whom you had sought to protect
om the very fate he had met, was dead, almost in
ur presence?"

Cora raised her eyes to Nick's then, as she replied,
rokenly:

"If you had not taken my hand in yours when you
ntered this room, I would not have replied to that
uestion; but although neither my eyes nor my voice
ould penetrate your disguise, I knew you the instant
ur hand touched mine; I knew you then, as well as
ou knew me. I sent the letter to you, Nick Carter,
nd if you did not receive it, it is because you left your
ouse before it arrived.

"The touch of your hand betrayed you to me. I
new that you recognized me, and I have sought, all
is time, to win some expression of confidence from
ou. I have done all this for you. I have done it all
save Mercedes Danton, the woman you love—to
ve her for you; and I have won only suspicion and
orn."

CHAPTER VII.

THE REVELATIONS OF CORA.

Nick Carter regarded his companion silently, for
ast tears had come into her eyes, and he saw that it
as hard only a word to send them flooding down her
eeks.

But presently, when she had grown calmer, he broke
e silence.

"Cora," he said, gently, "if I have appeared to dis-
st you it was because I forced myself to do so against
y inclination. Even now, my judgment as a de-
ctive ought to compel me to place you under arrest,
for appearances, take them all in all, are terribly against
you. Even your statement about the letter seems to be
one which might be questioned, because I did not leave
my house until after the second delivery of the mail this
morning, and a letter mailed here at the time you say
you posted yours should have reached me in the first
one.

"Hush! I do not say that I do not believe you. On
the contrary, I do believe you, but it is belief in you
that I feel; not belief in the appearance of things.
That is against you. I saw that you flushed when I
touched your hand a while ago, and for an instant I
wondered then if you knew me; but you acted the
part that you did not, and did it so well that I had for-
gotten that you might have done so."

Still she did not reply, and after a moment more of
silence, he added:

"Cora, I believe in you. Nothing short of positive
conviction could make me doubt you now. You have
been here two whole weeks. You came here, you say,
for my sake. Will you be a little more explicit, and
tell me why?"

"I have already told you why."

"Ay, one reason, but not all. You came here, you
say, to save Mercedes Danton. Why?"

"Because—can you ask me that? You love Mer-
cedes, and——"

"Hush, Cora! You are mistaken. I do not love
Mercedes, save as a dear friend—save as one who de-
serves everything that is good at my hands. Now tell
me all you have to tell."

"You do love her. I knew it long ago. I knew it
before I made myself known to you in Chicago. I
hated her then. I would have joined with the devil
himself to get her out of the way. That was why I lis-
tened to the projects of Isabel Benton. That was why
I felt and acted like a tigeress when we were saved
from the fire in Chicago—that is why I am here."

"You are paradoxical, Cora. How can that be why
you are here?"

"Because I believed that by coming here, and ren-
dering you a great service, I could at least win back
the regard I had lost; or, failing in that, I could win

back my own self-esteem, and incidentally do you a service."

"Still I do not understand."

"I came here to save Mercedes Danton's life."

"Do you think, then, that she is also in imminent danger?"

"She is in peril as great as that which threatened her brother an hour before his death. The ax hangs over her, and it may fall at any moment, but from what quarter, I cannot determine."

"How do you know this, Cora?"

"I do not know it. I only dread it, fear it, suspect it."

"Explain what you mean."

"How can I explain when I know nothing—really? How can I make you understand all that I fear, when as a matter of fact I have only my own suspicions to go upon?"

"At least tell me what those suspicions are."

"The first and most important above all others is, that I do not believe that Mercedes Danton is Mercedes Danton at all."

"You speak in enigmas."

"I know I do; and yet it is impossible for me to be plainer. But let us go back to the time in Chicago when you saved, or supposed that you saved, Mercedes from the burning house."

"Well."

"Do you remember that when you and I escaped from the house together, your first thought was to rescue Mercedes, whom you had good reason to believe was a prisoner in another part of that same house?"

"Certainly."

"Do you remember how you seized an ax and dashed up the stairs? How at the top of the stairs you heard a voice calling to you for help from the other side of a partition, and that you broke your way through it to find her, tied to the bed, on the other side of it, and that the fire was already in the room; that the bed had already caught the flames; that her clothing was actually on fire, and that when you finally struggled with her through the smoke and flame, her hair was singed and crimped, and curled by the heat, and that her face was scorched and red and inflamed?"

"Certainly, I remember it all. Why do you ask?"

"Do you think that you could possibly identify Mercedes Danton under such circumstances?"

"That is a strange question to ask."

"Do you? Remember, her face was scorched and inflamed; her hair was singed and colorless. Her voice was hoarse and husky with the smoke and heat. Do you think that you, or even her own brother, could positively identify her under such circumstances?"

"I think——"

"Wait. Do you think that anybody could identify her under such circumstances, if perhaps it were not she at all, but another who was trying to personate her?"

"You mean, if instead of Mercedes, the person I saved were in reality Isabel?"

"Yes; that is what I mean."

"But it could not have been Isabel."

"Granted, for the sake of the argument. Still, let us say that it was Isabel, also for the sake of the argument. Do you suppose, if it had been Isabel, that under the circumstances, you—even you—could have told the difference?"

"No. Nobody could have told the difference."

"So. Do you remember that when you called me to your aid in assisting her after you had taken her from the house, I hesitated, because—because I was——"

"Yes; I remember."

"And that then I went to her and sought to do all that I could for her? I know that you did, for you looked your appreciation at the time. Do you remember how I worked over her?"

"Certainly, I remember it."

"While I worked over her, she opened her eyes and looked up at me. For an instant it seemed as if she were about to speak, but she did not; still she looked at me—and there was that in her eyes, inflamed by heat and smoke though they were, which I have never seen save in one pair of eyes in all the world—the eyes of Isabel Benton."

"It is preposterous, Cora."

"Never mind, listen to me to the end. Perhaps you may discover a method in my madness, after all."

"Go on, then."

"When I caught that look in her eyes, I started back, for on the instant I thought it was Isabel you had saved. But then I remembered the fright, the fire, the smoke, the heat, the terror of her experience, and I forced the thought away from me. I argued that it could not be Isabel."

"Certainly not. How could she have been so nearly consumed in a fire of her own building? How could she have gotten herself tied to the bed in that room from which I saved her? Do you imagine that her plotting had gone so far, or pierced so deep that she was willing to risk her own life almost to the point of losing it, and certainly to the point of losing her beauty?"

"No. I could not think so—then. But later, the suspicion returned to me."

"It is not tenable, Cora."

"Wait. It may not be; but look at what has happened since that time."

"Very well."

"Suppose it were Isabel?"

"What then?"

"Why, if it were Isabel, and she had passed muster under your eyes—under the sharp eyes of Nick Carter—she had succeeded in disarming the only foe she really feared. If it were Isabel, you had taken her from the fire at the risk of your own life, believing her to be Mercedes. You had conducted her personally to the house where she was attended after the fire, and you had left her own brother came to take her away and bring her back to New York. You had delivered her over to her family as Mercedes, and yet all the time it was Isabel."

"Go on, Cora."

"Somewhere in the world Mercedes herself was a prisoner—somewhere where Isabel had placed her; and where could she have placed her, think you, supposing my suspicions to be true?"

"Who can say?"

"I can say—I can!"

"Then say it, for God's sake!"

"I can say, for I have heard Isabel threaten what she would do, or what she once thought of doing, when she feared that, even if she murdered Mercedes, she might encounter difficulties in ridding herself of the body."

"What did she threaten?"

"She said there were madhouses in the land where they took patients without being too particular concerning their antecedents, provided there was plenty of money paid for the accommodation."

"She was right about that."

"She said that she could place Mercedes in one of those private madhouses; that she could take her there herself, and because of their wonderful resemblance to each other, represent her as her own twin sister. Now, do you follow me?"

"Not quite, Cora."

"Then listen. After my first suspicions found root, they grew and grew, until they amounted to certainty. From asking myself if the woman you saved from the fire were not really Isabel Benton, I became convinced that she was and is Isabel. I remembered the madhouse threat she had made, and I argued, what more natural than that Isabel should put Mercedes in an asylum under the name of Benton, return to the house in which she had held her a prisoner, set it afire, plan so that you should save her from the flames—as you did—and, in short, I investigated on my own account."

"You investigated? How?"

"By paying a Chicago detective to search every asylum and sanitarium in that vicinity, for an inmate named Isabel or Mercedes Benton. I did well, too, for to-day—almost within the hour—since you have been in this house, in fact, I have received this," and she drew a letter from her bosom and gave it to Nick Carter.

CHAPTER VIII.

A WOMAN'S MURDEROUS WORK.

The detective spread the letter open before him and read it aloud. It was short and to the point.

"CHICAGO, August 30, 190—.

"MADAM: There is a patient named Mercedes Benton at 'Perfect Rest' Sanitarium, just outside the limits of the village of Calais, in this State. She is about twenty or twenty-one years old, dark, Spanish type, very beautiful, perfect teeth, black eyes, five feet four in height, graceful, educated, well bred. Said to be afflicted with peculiar form of mania. Believes herself to be an heiress and claims the name of Danton. Put here by sister, but claims she has no sister. Receives the best of care. Has large and comfortable room to herself and attendant, but is not allowed liberty at all. Never leaves her room. I obtained situation there as attendant, remained a week and so obtained this information from one of the female attendants. Did not see the patient myself.

"Awaiting your further orders, I am,

"Respectfully yours,

"JASPER GOLDING."

"What do you think of that?" asked Cora, when Nick had finished reading the letter.

"It seems to support your theory," he replied.

"Does it not prove it?"

"In effect, it does. You received it to-day—since——"

"Since you have been in the house. The postman brought it not more than ten minutes before I encountered you."

"Cora," said Nick, slowly, after a moment's pause, "you have done nobly in this matter. You have acted with great wisdom and forethought. You ventured into this house on mere suspicion, but in order to be present and to prevent, if possible, the catastrophe that has fallen, as well as others that were likely to occur. How shall I thank you?"

"Hush!" she said. "Do not try to thank me. It is little enough that I have done. If the person you acted from the first had been a man, you would have been less conservative in your assistance, and would never have been imposed upon. As it was, you were satisfied that you had rescued Mercedes."

"But even now, Cora, it seems almost incredible that Isabel Benton could have dared to bring herself so near to death by flames, for the sake of carrying our her plot to the end."

"Ay; but remember that we do not know all her plans. Remember that the negro, although you sent for him, came to the room after he had started the fire. He locked himself in the room through his own stupidity, and you knocked him on the head before he had a chance to tell what he might have been instructed to say."

"True! Sure! I see it all now. He was to tell that a woman was tied to a bed in another part of the house, she knowing that I would hurry to the rescue. She planned that I would rescue her almost exactly as it turned out, only that I should do it a little sooner. Cora, you should be a detective."

"I want to become one. I want you to teach me."

"Teach you? Why, child, you have taught me more to-day than I could teach you in a year, for you have taught me to——"

"To what, Nick?"

"That we had better return to the affairs of the moment at once."

"Are you satisfied now that the Mercedes Danton who is in this house, is no other than Isabel Benton?"

"Perfectly."

"And if that is true——"

"Well?"

"Who killed Reginald Danton?"

"Isabel."

"Will you tell me what to do next?"

"Yes. Go to your young mistress at once. Tell her that a detective, one Joshua Juniper, is here, sent by the coroner. Say that Nick Carter was sent for, but that he was out of the city, and that the chief of police recommended this man Juniper. Arrange an interview at once."

"And if she refuses to see you?"

"In that case I will go to her room without her permission."

"Is that all the direction you have to give?"

"At present, yes. I will wait for you in the library. You may leave me here. I will go to the library in ten minutes."

Cora turned away and crossed the room to the door, but there she hesitated.

Presently she retraced her steps and stood silent before the detective.

"Well?" he asked, tentatively.

"Have I won back your confidence and regard?" she said, in a low tone.

"You have won much more than that, Cora; just how much, I will tell you another time."

"You do not despise me because I love because I have loved you ever since I was a little mite of a girl?"

"No," he said, and was silent; and she remained for a moment looking at him wistfully, and then turned away and went out of the room.

For several moments after she left him Nick Carter remained in the same attitude, deep in thought, and his mind was not on the affairs of the moment. Although he stood within reach of the dead body of Reginald Danton, he did not once glance in that direction until after a considerable interval.

Then, as with an effort, shaking himself together, he drew closer to it, and bent over the silent form.

"Poor chap," he murmured. "To be cut off in this way is an awful thing. It would seem almost as if some curse followed your family, Reginald. There shall be no more wine suppers for you, my boy. No more rollicking home through the still hours of the morning with almost more than you can carry, and falling asleep in the chair on the piazza. No more of that, my bright young lad. How I wish that you might have been spared to see the error of your ways and to have mended them; to have lived to become a comfort to your sweet sister."

The detective was in an introspective mood, and he folded his arms and gazed silently into the dead face before him, unmindful of the fact that behind him, at the farther side of the room, another door than the one he and Cora had used was slowly and silently swinging ajar.

There was not a sound to disturb the train of his thought, and still the door continued to swing slowly farther and farther open.

Presently the fingers of a hand could be seen clasping the edge of the door, if he had turned ever so little; but he did not turn; and the door opened wider.

Then the top of a woman's head appeared in the opening, and two gleaming eyes looked from the place behind the door into the room—and still the detective did not turn.

After the top of the head and the gleaming eyes came the face—a face swathed in bandages, but arranged so that it appeared as if they were used for concealment rather than for other reasons.

Then the shoulders followed the head and face, and then—the full figure of a woman stood revealed in the doorway.

For an instant she stood revealed so that he could have seen her plainly had he but turned toward her, but there was no sound to attract his attention, and his gaze was still fixed upon the face of his dead friend.

Then, slowly and with studied deliberation, the woman raised her right hand from the folds of her dress, and when it appeared, a revolver showed in her grasp—a revolver which she was slowly raising so that the bullet from it might be aimed at the detective's heart.

Something there was then that disturbed him. Whether it was an inner consciousness that informed him of the nearness of another person, or if he heard the rustle of a garment, can never be known. He could not have told himself.

It is certain, however, that something disturbed him, for like lightning he wheeled in his tracks.

But he started into activity too late.

The woman saw even that first impulse on his part to turn about, and she raised her arm to a level with the quickness of thought, and when Nick Carter turned, as he did, it was to meet the blinding flash of the pistol as it was fired almost in his face.

The report of it was sharp and clear, but not over loud, and the would-be murderess had correctly figured that beyond the thick walls and the heavy door of that room of death, the sound was not likely to penetrate to any considerable distance.

The flash came so suddenly when he turned that Nick could not have had time to discover whether it was a man or a woman who fired it, even had the bullet missed him; but as it was, he was hit, and he turned only to pitch forward on his face on the floor, and to lie there as silently and as still as the corpse that rested on the bier above him.

The woman seemed not to care to study the effect of her shot, for the instant she fired she disappeared through the door again, and pulled it shut behind her; and, as it closed, a key grated in the lock, and was withdrawn, showing that she had fastened the way as she went.

* * * * * * *

In the library, ten minutes or so later, Cora Tempest waited for Nick Carter; but she waited in vain, for he did not come.

When half an hour had passed she became still more anxious than before, and at last she started away, determined to return to the room of death to discover there, if possible, what it was that detained him.

She had not been able to see her mistress, so she had no message to take to him; but she had been told that Miss Mercedes would see her in half an hour. Now, the half hour was up, but Cora was determined to see what it was that detained the detective before she went again to the apartments of her mistress.

It was not to be, however.

As she passed from the library into the lower hall her mistress' maid met her.

"Miss Mercedes will see you now," she said, blandly. "She wishes you to come at once."

"In a moment," replied Cora. "I have another errand just now."

"She said to come at once," insisted the maid, "and I think she meant it. She wishes you to take the detective to her, but she desires to see you first."

"Very well," replied Cora. "I will go to her."

So, instead of returning directly to the room where she had left Nick, and so finding him there, on the floor, beside the corpse of Reginald, she went directly to Mercedes Danton's room.

And there, as she entered through the doorway, she was seized and thrown to the floor, a heavy blanket was smothered over her head, and without the power to utter a sound she was borne into the inner room.

CHAPTER IX.

NICK CARTER'S AWFUL PERIL.

Into the room where the body of Reginald Danton was awaiting the hour of burial, through the same doorway that had been used by Nick Carter and Cora Tempest, a woman entered ten minutes after Cora was enticed into the room of Mercedes.

She entered and closed the door carefully behind her, and then she tiptoed across the space which separated her from the form of Nick Carter, where it was stretched senseless upon the floor.

One glance at the prone figure of the detective satisfied her, for she passed over it at once, and with the soft ends of her fingers tapped against the door which closed the entrance from which the bullet had been fired.

It was the maid—the same who had carried the message to Cora, in the library—who did all this.

The door against which she tapped so softly opened at once, and in the opening appeared the same bandaged face that had peered through it at Nick Carter's back before the bullet was fired at him.

And these women did not speak.

They uttered no sound, but strode silently into the room and paused, one at the head and one at the feet of the detective.

Then, stooping, they raised him from the floor and carried him swiftly through the open door into the room beyond; and then the door was closed silently; the key grated in the lock again and was withdrawn; and after that all was silent, and as it had been before, save for one little spot of blood stain upon the carpet

where Nick had fallen—a small spot not larger than a silver quarter.

Motion will sometimes accomplish what water will not, in the work of bringing back to consciousness persons who have been rendered senseless by blows upon the head; for motion starts up the circulation which has been for a time suspended by reason of inaction.

The detective was conscious that somebody was carrying him somewhere, but why and where he could not conjecture.

He felt the undulating motion; he was conscious of the tight hold which some person had taken upon his ankles, and he felt as if his coat was being drawn off over his head, but he could not, for the life of him, guess why this was.

He knew, too, that his head ached frightfully, and he had a vague recollection of having received some sort of a blow there, but what it was he could not remember.

Then, he was dropped with a sudden jolt upon something soft, and presently he felt again as if something were pinching his ankles, and this time, whatever it was, it held them tightly together so that he could not move them at all.

And after that, his wrists.

First one and then the other was taken in a tight grasp and seemingly held, as in a vise, and when he sought to move them, the effort was utterly in vain. They were fast.

Then, also, as if the mysteries about him were constantly deepening, something pressed hard against his throat—and then, with a sudden effort he roused himself out of the dreamy drowsiness into which he seemed to have fallen, and awoke to full consciousness—to find that all his dreams were true.

And at the same instant he knew why they were true, for, peering down into his now wide-open eyes was that swathed and bandaged countenance which he had not seen before, but which he had heard described, and which had looked upon him from behind the screen where the corpse of Reginald was lying.

He did not speak to her. He preferred first to take an account of his situation.

He could guess that he was lying upon a bed.

He knew that his arms were stretched out to either edge of it, and that there ropes had been drawn tightly around his wrists, which in turn were tied securely to the iron frame of the bedstead.

He knew that his ankles had been roped in the same manner and that one of them had been made fast to either corner of the foot of the bed frame; and he knew that still another cord had been passed across his throat and tied to either side of the bed, in order that he might not raise his head from the position in which it had been placed.

And he realized that because of all these precautions, he had been rendered as weak as a child, from sheer impossibility to use his strength.

And then he remembered how that strength had been stolen from him in the first place.

He remembered feeling as if somebody was behind him, and turning suddenly only to face a blinding flash and a roar that had deprived him of his senses.

He knew now why his head ached.

He had been shot.

How seriously he could not determine; but that the wound was not very bad he was convinced, both by the clearness of his perceptions and by the returning strength which he felt coursing through him even though he had no opportunity to make use of it.

And still that swathed and bandaged face looked down upon him from just above his own; and even through the swathes and bandages he recognized it.

He remembered Cora then, and he thought that only an hour ago, but for her, he might still have thought that this face belonged to Mercedes, driven mad by her injuries and sufferings and by the shock of her brother's death.

Now, however, he knew to whom it belonged, and he perceived, moreover, that she knew that he knew.

"You seem to have me on the hip, so to speak, Isabel," he said, and he smiled.

"And you seem to discover something that is amusing in the situation," she replied.

"Why not?" he asked. "You are always amusing. That is why you are interesting."

"Really. Do you know where you are, Nick Carter?"

"In the rooms of Mercedes Danton, I suppose. Where else, Isabel?"

"There is no Isabel," she returned. "Isabel is dead."

"Well," replied Nick, "one thing is quite certain. If she isn't, she ought to be."

Isabel tossed her head, then crossed the room and deliberately tore the bandages from her face.

For a moment she worked before the glass with great care, and then she returned to the bedside.

"Look," she said; and the detective was startled, so perfect was the resemblance which this fiendish woman bore to the young heiress she impersonated.

"You might almost deceive her own father and mother," he said. "Her brother you have killed and he is beyond the practice of deception now."

"It is a month since I was burned and you rescued me from the fire," she said, ignoring his remark. "I have not needed those bandages since three weeks ago, but I was afraid to appear without them, on Reginald's account, and on——"

"Mine; eh?"

"Exactly. But now that Reginald is dead, and you——" She paused significantly.

"Well; go on. And I?"

"Now that you are as good as dead——"

"Oh, am I? I suppose it is not really your fault that I am not quite dead, is it? That bullet of yours must have given me a close shave."

"I meant to put it between your eyes, but it only shaved the side of your head, over your ear."

"Humph!" said Nick. "I hope the hair will grow again where it shaved me. Do you think it will, Isabel? I should extremely dislike to have my beauty ruined."

"Your beauty is a thing of the past, Nick Carter."

"I know, Isabel! One would think I were growing old."

"No," he said, with a cruel smile, "you will not live to grow old."

"How lovely. Isabel, you are really quite a remarkable woman—you really are; but you would be much more remarkable and much more successful in your undertakings if you were not such an infernal liar, as well as—— I wonder, Isabel, if it is quite proper to liken a woman to an ass; I suppose one ought really to say donkey; eh?"

Isabel laughed unreservedly, but without much mirth.

"I say, my queen of crooks," said Nick, "if I were you I'd never laugh."

"No?" said Isabel. "Why not?"

"Because a laugh is something which cannot be counterfeited. There must be purity of some form behind it, and you haven't any purity in any form, you know. If you laugh, after you have put Cora and me out of the way, disposed of Mercedes' father and mother, and otherwise cleared the track in front of you, somebody will find you out. Don't laugh."

"I'll remember that. I suppose, Nick Carter, it never occurred to you that every word you and Cora uttered in that room where the corpse is laid out was overhead by me."

"Well, no; it did not occur to me, Isabel. I wish it had."

"No doubt. That came near to being a very pretty love scene. If I had not happened to be there, you and Cora would have outwitted me, wouldn't you?"

"It is quite probable."

"And I had to take a desperate chance in shooting you while you were there; but there was no other way."

"Too bad, isn't it?"

"I have Cora in my power, too."

"Indeed! Since when?"

"Since just after I shot you. She is here in this room—within the sound of our voices. You can speak to her if you like."

"Cora! Are you there?" asked Nick, raising his voice.

"Yes," came the reply from across the room.

"Have they bound you down like a roaring lion, same as they have me?"

"I cannot move, if that is what you mean."

"Are you comfortable?"

"Quite, thank you."

"All right, my girl. Don't lose your head—or your patience. I'll have you out of this before long."

"I know you will," replied Cora, with perfect confidence and trust. "I will wait."

"Hear them!" exclaimed Isabel, with a sneer. "A pair of billing doves are jokes to you two. One would think that I intended to permit you to get up and walk out of here as if nothing had happened."

"Well," replied Nick, "I don't exactly expect that, but I do expect to walk out of here, and to take Cora with me when I go."

Isabel laughed aloud.

"Tut-tut, Nick Carter!" said she. "Do you know what walking out of here by you and Cora would mean to me?"

"It ought to mean about six electric chairs," replied Nick, placidly, "but I suppose one would have to answer. I'd like to operate the thing—that is, the switches, though. By Jove! I'd turn on the current so slowly that you would dance a dozen hornpipes before you shuffled off midst flame and smoke."

"You are as facetious as ever. But do you suppose that knowing that your liberty means my death, that I contemplate for one instant that you shall ever leave that bed alive?"

"Well, no. I do not suppose you contemplate such a thing; but contemplation and reality are not always [illegible] you know."

"Do you want me to tell you how I am going to kill you?"

"Why, yes; that will be real genial of you."

"I shall dose you with morphine, presently. Oh, you needn't smile; if you won't swallow it, I can administer it to you hypodermically until you are only half conscious. After that you will swallow it fast enough."

"And Cora likewise, I suppose?"

"You shall be treated in the same manner. You shall die together. I will give you to her in death even if she could not get you living."

"How infinitely kind of you."

"After the morphine—that is, after you are stupid with it, I intend to pour a teaspoonful of cyanide of potash down your throat—and Cora's."

"How inartistic, Isabel. A teaspoonful is enough to kill a regiment."

"So be it. A teaspoonful you shall each have; and as I do not believe in delays, I will begin now. Will you swallow the morphine willingly, and so make your death an easy one, or must I force you to take it?" she asked.

CHAPTER X.

THE FIGHT A WOMAN PUT UP.

"Before I reply to that question, Isabel, I wish you would answer one," said Nick.

"What is it?"

"I wish you would tell me how it was that you dared to risk death so nearly in the burning house near Chicago?"

"That puzzles you, does it?"

"I confess that it does. I never gave you credit for so much courage."

"The negro failed me. I never knew why until now, when I listened to the talk between you and Cora."

"So he was to tell me that you were there?"

"Yes. And he was to leave the door open so that you could escape when he left the room. I had him tie me on the bed, and I supposed the sheets were tied so that I could escape in case you were late in coming, or for any reason you did not come at all. But you did not come, and then when I tried to free myself, I found that he had bound me so securely that I could not escape. I think now that he did it purposely, meaning to roast me in the flames."

"Doubtless; and it is the only really good act I have heard about concerning that particular negro."

"I believed that I would be burned to death. I screamed and cried for help, and then I heard you hammering on the partition. If you had entered the room where I was, before I fainted, I should have be-

trayed myself to you, and all this would not have happened."

"How unfortunate that I did not do so!"

"As it was, when I opened my eyes, I saw that you had been fooled. I saw that you believed you had saved Mercedes. I was much more afraid of Cora's eyes than of yours, at that time."

"And with good reason, too, it would appear."

"No. I fooled her. My scorching was the real thing. There was no joke about it. But I hated her so that I could not avoid showing it in my eyes, and that gave her the clew."

"And after that, with the swathes and bandages, and the husky voice, you have succeeded in fooling everybody, haven't you?"

"Yes; even you. But for Cora's suspicions—— Bah! what is the use of talking?"

"None whatever, believe me."

"You did not reply to my question. Will you take that morphine willingly, or shall I force it upon you?"

"Isabel, when you have lived longer and known me better, you will discover that I never walk into trouble willingly. I am afraid that you will have to make me take it, if I am to take it at all. One thing puzzles me, however."

"You are sparring for time, aren't you?"

"Perhaps; still I am nevertheless honestly puzzled."

"About what?"

"What will you do with two bodies after you have put Cora and me out of the way?"

"I'll take care of that: never fear."

"They won't be exactly—er—sanitary, you know, if you undertake to keep 'em here."

"Don't worry. I'd a whole lot rather take my chances against what you can do after you are dead, Nick Carter, than to run any risks with you living."

"You are such a practical woman," sighed Nick.

She turned away without replying and crossed the room.

Nick's head was so low upon the pillow, and the cord was so snugly across his neck, that he could not see what she was about, but he could hear the rattle of glasses and he had no doubt that she was preparing the hypodermic of morphine that she had threatened.

As the great detective waited there while she continued to make her preparation, he was forced to make the admission to himself that never in all his experiences had he been in a predicament so bad as this one.

That the ropes which bound him to the bed rendered him utterly helpless, he was assured, for already he had tried many times to do what he could to move his feet and arms, but each time utterly without success. He was as helpless as a babe and the rope across his throat rendered him as utterly helpless as if he were indeed a child.

He knew that in another moment she would return to the bedside with the little instrument in her hands, with which, with a few applications, she, weak woman though she was, could steal away his senses utterly and leave him totally at her mercy.

And he knew more than that. He knew that she had not boasted idly when she told him of the manner of his death that was to come. He knew her too well to suppose that she would hesitate to carry out the plan she had chosen.

That she would kill both him and Cora was an established fact, provided something did not happen to prevent her; and whatever happened, he realized then and there, must come from another source than himself, for he was powerless.

Nevertheless he tried again and yet again, and while he was still trying, and with each effort more and more convinced how utterly fruitless it all was, he heard her voice beside him and knew that [illegible]

He looked up and met her cold gaze [illegible]

"Gulliver is trapped at last," she said, with a sneer. "You can't burst your bonds, can you, my little giant?"

"No," replied Nick, "I cannot."

"So now, will you take your medicine, like a real good boy?" she asked, banteringly.

"I have already answered that question," he told her.

"So be it," she said. "In that case I must administer it. I hope you will lie quietly while I insert the hypodermic needle in your neck. I am told that the drug

takes effect much more quickly if it is applied in the neck."

"Possibly," replied Nick.

"And you will lie still?"

"I am not likely to move very much," said Nick. "I wish I might."

She bent over him until her face almost touched his own, and then, with her left hand, she drew the skin tightly along one side of his neck.

The next instant he could feel the prick of the needle as she pushed it under the skin, farther and farther, until he knew that she was ready to press the plunger and so to shoot the contents of the syringe into his system.

His mind and hers were both concentrated upon her occupation, and so, at the same instant both were startled by the sound of a heavy blow and the falling of some body to the floor.

With a loud cry, Isabel Benton withdrew the syringe from the detective's neck and leaped back, away from the bed.

And then Nick saw a remarkable thing happen.

He saw Cora Tempest dart within his range of vision, a picture of fury aroused, and he saw her seize upon Isabel Benton, and struggle with her across the floor and so out of his sight.

But if he could not see them he could hear plainly enough; ay, and sometimes feel, too, for as they struggled together they often came in contact with the bed and shook it and its occupant with the force of their exertions.

"Good girl, Cora!" called Nick to her, encouraging her with his voice as much as he could do.

"Good girl, brave girl, Cora!" he continued. "I don't know how you did it, but you got free from your bonds somehow, and you have knocked the maid senseless with a bottle or something so you could tackle Isabel alone.

"You will win, too, Cora.

"Don't try to speak to me to reassure me. You need every atom of your breath to beat Isabel, but you will beat her. You will have her on the floor and at your mercy in a moment.

"Keep it up, Cora. I'm working here with all my might to get free, and I think I'm gaining. If you can keep up that struggle about three minutes longer, I'll manage to get out of this and after that we'll make short work of Isabel Benton."

And he was working with all his might to free himself.

Never before in his life had he been helpless while a woman did the fighting. There was a humorous side to the situation, and he could have smiled while he strained at the cords, if only less had depended upon his exertions; but he did not feel that he could even afford to waste the strength consumed in a smile, considering the desperate effort he was putting forth.

He could hear them panting for breath as they struggled nearer to him, and he thought that it must be a wonderful kind of a combat to observe—this fight between two beautiful women—if only he could have raised his head so that he could see it.

And then, suddenly, something snapped.

At first he did not know what it was, and then he noticed that he could move his feet.

The two women in their struggle had broken the framework short off from the foot of the bed upon which he was lying, and in doing so had freed the cords which held his ankles bound to the posts.

And so, his feet being free, he could turn—he could bring into use a score more of his muscles than were available before.

"Courage, Cora," he called. "I'll be with you now in half a minute."

With a mighty effort he brought his legs up into the air and threw the weight of his body as well as what strength he could exert against the cord which held his right wrist.

It could not stand the strain, and it snapped.

With his right hand free, the rest was a matter of a moment.

He caught the rope across his throat, and tore it away now as if it were a spider's web, and he burst the rope that held his left wrist almost with the same motion.

"Now, Cora!" he cried out; and with a bound he leaped from the bed to the floor.

He was not an instant too soon.

The maid, whom Cora had knocked down after working herself free from her own bonds, and whom she had struck with a vase from the center table, had recovered. She had staggered to her feet, and was already approaching the combatants when Nick reached the floor.

In another instant she would have been upon them, and Cora would have been pulled to the floor, helpless.

But she discovered the detective even as he leaped toward her, and turned.

With that dreaded personage free and advancing toward her, she had but one thought, and that was to escape.

With a shriek of dismay she turned toward the door and dashed through it, and on out through the other room into the hallway, and away.

Then, suddenly, when Isabel Benton saw that Nick Carter was free, she ceased struggling.

In that instant she permitted her whole form to relax, as if she had fainted, and so she slipped through Cora's arms to the floor.

Nick started toward her, suspecting her intention; but he was too late.

She raised one hand, and with a quick motion tore an ear-drop from one of her ears, and did it so quickly and so fiercely that it tore through the lobe of the ear, bringing the flesh and blood with it.

And that bulb, which had formed an ear-drop, proved to be of glass.

One motion of her arm placed it between her teeth, and she crushed it there.

Her eyes were fixed upon Nick Carter when she did it, and there was a gleam of triumph in them as she felt the glass crunch between her teeth; the next instant, she had fallen back upon the floor, dead.

That bulb had been filled with cyanide of potash, the very poison with which she had threatened Nick and Cora—and it had been prepared and was worn for just such an emergency as had happened.

* * * * * * *

There is very little more to tell you, my reader.

The maid was captured, and suffered imprisonment for life, as an accomplice in the murder of Reginald Danton.

Mrs. Danton did not survive the shock of her son's death, and she soon followed him; and the father, when Mercedes was returned to him, retired from business and sailed for Europe with his daughter, where Dr. Pollock soon followed them.

And Cora Tempest? How fared it with her after that struggle for her own life and the life of the man she loved? How would you have had it happen, my reader?

I think I will let you finish the story for yourself.

THE END.

Next week's issue, No. 394, will contain "A Princess of Hades; or, The Reappearance of Dazaar, the Fiend." The title of this story will tell the readers of the NICK CARTER WEEKLY a good deal, but the story will tell them a good deal more. You will find out how it was that Dazaar was enabled to reappear after having been buried, to all appearances. The mysterious power she exercised over Buck Granger will partially explain this, but you will have to read the story to the end to understand it. You are sure to do this. Having once started this story you will find it impossible to stop until you have read the last word.

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